

The University of Chicago

THE MECHANICS OF TRANSLATION GREEK

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE GRADUATE FACULTY IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF NEW TESTAMENT
AND EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE
1931

By
JOHN MERLE RIFE

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THE MECHANICS OF TRANSLATION GREEK

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TRANSLATION Greek has, apparently from the very first, been criticized as peculiar and inferior. The following is an attempt to state the nature of the peculiarity and its principal cause.

The peculiarities which distinguish any translation from original composition are mainly products of one of two opposite tendencies, literalness and artificiality. These are the Scylla and Charybdis of all translators. The easier and usual course is to fall into literalism, hence, for "Merry Christmas," most Greeks in America say *Καλὰ Χριστούγεννα*, which is flat; while the *Χριστούγεννα εὖθυμα* which sometimes appears in print, sounds stilted. There are scholarly translators who deliberately aim at literalism, in spite of its attendant flatness. A certain well-known Latin professor regularly tells college freshmen that the ideal translation is one from which the original text could be reconstructed. Such a version, however, would merely be the naïve product of a perfect skill in automatically perceiving one language and automatically expressing the perception in another. Such mechanistic rendering always involves a certain poverty and dead level in the product. As far as possible it is word for word. When this is impossible it is short phrase for short phrase. It is invariably sentence for sentence. It is inevitably hide-bound. This is, of course, fatal to style. The ideal translation should certainly have a style of equivalent quality with the original. It should, of course, be accurate. Josephus, in rendering the Old Testament narratives, strove for style, but had not so much regard for accuracy. Free translation is suspected by the teacher of foreign

languages, because the pupil commonly leaves the beaten path only to avoid difficulties. An accurate translation into a natural style is rarely attempted and still less often attained, because it involves meditation. It can not be made on the spur of the moment.

Some translations begin with a natural style, but such well begun versions usually sink rapidly to the dead level of literalism. Any translation, no matter how high the aim, is almost bound to sag if a portion of considerable length is attempted at one time. A prolonged effort increasingly subjects the translator to the spell of the original language. If he can get the idea so clearly in mind that he can forget the words of the original, then he is in a position to use a natural style in his translation. Few translators take the time for this. The fundamental requisite of an ideal translation is complete independence of expression coupled with absolute dependence of idea. The fact that some translators have this ideal, but lack the persistence to carry it out, at least consistently, makes the first page of a translation a poor place to look for typical translation phenomena. The ideal translation, as here defined, would have no typical peculiarities.

However, the usual, literal translation certainly has peculiarities, and it is believed that they are typical and regular enough to be described as a more or less definite set of characteristics, at least in the case of Greek translated from Semitic originals.

The basic characteristic, as suggested above, is the mechanical rendering of each single word in the order in which it occurs in the original. The full realization of this characteristic is only possible when the language of translation has a completely flexible word-order. Probably no language has such complete flexibility, but Greek and Latin, whose syntactical relations are so largely indicated by inflection, have a far more flexible word-order than such languages as English and Chinese, whose syntactical relations are largely indicated by word-order. In the English sentence "The dog bit the man," the only indication that the dog and not the man did the biting is the word-order. In Greek, however, whether ancient or modern, the subject, verb, and object of this sentence can be arranged in six different orders, the syntax remaining the same because it is indicated by case ending. It is possible then for a translation into Greek to be much more literal than one into English.

In combination with retention of word-order is usually found systematic representation. These constitute the two principal factors of literalism. Although usually associated, they are essentially independent. Systematic representation is the practice of always rendering the same word in the same way. This, of course, does not at all necessitate the retention of the original word-order; nor does the retention of word-order involve systematic representation. Theodotion, if it is not too much trouble, usually retains the original word-order,¹ but often has a number of renderings for a given word. For example, in the first sixteen verses of Daniel he translates the preposition ἐν thirteen times, rendering it seven times by ἀπό , twice by μετά , once each by ἐκ , παρά , ὑπέρ , and once by ἀξίω and the accusative. The Venetus translator² employs a vastly different vocabulary from other Greek translators of the Old Testament, but is, with a few exceptions, slavishly literal. His stilted vocabulary is a part of his system of representation.

The usual method by which scholars have attempted to collect a set of criteria for the characterization and detection of translation Greek has been to search for examples of literal renderings of individual foreign words and idioms, i. e., for traces of, or lapses into systematic representation. The reliability of such criteria has been often questioned. Their futility has been clearly demonstrated in the devastating study by E. C. Colwell.³ The weakness of this line of attack lies partly in the fact that each translator may have a different system of representation. Contrast, for instance, the vocabularies of Theodotion and Venetus. Nevertheless, systematic representation is a besetting sin of translators and must be noted in any study of the nature of translations.

In the present study, however, it is suggested that the more fruitful line of attack is to be found in the investigation of word-order.

Semitic languages have a relatively fixed word-order, while Greek has a relatively free order. Translation Greek then, may be expected to shape its sentence structure largely in conformity to the

¹ Cf. Rife, *Some Translation Phenomena in the Greek Versions of Daniel*, an unpublished dissertation, University of Chicago Libraries, 1931. p. 62ff.

² See the edition of *Graecus Venetus* by Oscar Gebhardt, Leipzig, 1875.

³ *The Greek of the Fourth Gospel*, University of Chicago Press, 1931.

Semitic original. Do the facts, as we find them in the LXX, bear out this expectation?

Perhaps the best answer is to say that the principle was formulated after a detailed study of the facts,⁴ though it now appears so self-evident that one is chagrined at not having stated it *a priori*.

Some of the commonest fixities of Semitic word-order which do not correspond to Greek word-order are:

No word comes between the article and its noun.

An adjective always immediately follows its substantive.

No postpositive conjunctions.

A genitive always immediately follows its construct.

A direct, personal, pronominal object always follows its governing verb.

A demonstrative pronoun always follows its substantive.

In addition to the above, though not so fixed, are the normal sequences of subject, verb, and object.

It seems reasonable to suppose, *a priori* this time, that any piece of Greek which exhibits the above, along with other less common features of Semitic word-order, must be a translation from a Semitic original. Upon testing this supposition, however, certain caveats emerge.

First, one must be aware of certain drifts in the Greek language. Its normal order in ancient times was for the adjective to follow the noun, but now it precedes; postpositive conjunctions died out entirely in colloquial Greek and, except for $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$, became practically extinct in literary composition; a genitive preceeding the noun modified comes more and more to suggest literary influence; the more frequent ancient order of subject, verb, and object was subject-object-verb (sov), while the normal modern order, for nouns, is subject-verb-object (svo).⁵

Moreover, colloquial Greek in general resembles Semitic more than does literary Greek, in word-order.

Also, the nature of the subject matter is continually upsetting the validity of statistical comparisons, e. g., in the closing of letters,

⁴ *Some Translation Phenomena in the Greek Versions of Daniel*, cited in note 1.

⁵ The abbreviations vso, svo, sov, vos, osv, ovs are used below with reference to the sequence of subject, verb and object in sentences.

ἀσπάζουαι almost always takes vso word-order, which is the usual Hebrew order. Long lists of names necessarily upset any statistical inquiry in which they are included.

Neither can one escape the impression that scriptural style was imitated by certain writers steeped in the LXX.

To test the items of word-order listed above, as well as others which may appear significant, by combing through all available translation Greek and large sections of other Koine literature, will be an arduous and prolonged task; but it will probably have to be done if we are to reach any certain conclusions. I have myself made only the barest beginnings, and the statements which follow are largely tentative.

In investigating the position of the article, one of the first indications is that the article is used less frequently in classical Greek than in the more literal portions of the LXX. It is also a comparatively simple device for the translator to separate the article from its noun by inserting δὲ where καὶ would otherwise have preceded the article. This is one of the favorite devices of Graecus Venetus. Perhaps all translation Greek contains some instances of this slight deviation from Semitic order. In the opening pages of Exodus the sharp increase in the frequency of δὲ indicates that the extreme literalism of Genesis had been criticized. This one slight concession only alleviates one of the symptoms, not the underlying cause of the non-Greek style of the book. The method of separating article and noun which is more distinctive of original Greek is the insertion of an adjective or adjective phrase, the latter, of course, indicating literary effort. Earlier Greek, and later literary Greek, make extensive use of the postpositives γάρ, τε, οὖν, the first being, perhaps, the least literary of the three. Taking a sample page from each of the LXX books for which there is a Massoretic text extant, one finds that about 4% of the articles are separated from their nouns, while in those without a Massoretic text about 11% are separated. This latter figure is more striking when one remembers that some of these books had, no doubt, Semitic originals. A similar sample from the New Testament epistles shows about 18%, and samples from seven non-biblical works of classical, Koine, and modern Greek show 25%. It is clear that comparative lack of such separation is an indication of a Semitic original. In samples taken

from each of the Apostolic Fathers this separation was the most frequent exception to the above-listed items of Semitic order.

The position of the adjective seems to come next in importance. The drift in Greek was, in Koine times, toward placing the adjective before the substantive. Hebrew and Aramaic have no such tendency. On sample pages examined from each of the first ten LXX books, only one exception to the Hebrew order occurred. On the second page of Daniel, however, the LXX has eight adjectives and six of them are in the inverted position. Theodotion translates the same passage with the use of only two adjectives, both in the Semitic order. This simply shows what any translator can do when he tries not to be literal, and the translator of the LXX Daniel certainly made the attempt, but in no thoroughgoing manner. Samples from the New Testament epistles show a very high proportion of non-Semitic adjective order. In the Gospels it is much lower. In the study of word order one can not escape the suggestion that there is some sort of Semitic influence in the Gospel language, yet it does not at present seem likely that any conclusive evidence can be assembled. For the historical student, probably the most crucial problem involved in the study of translation Greek is whether any considerable portion of the pericopes took form first in Aramaic. A thoroughgoing study of the word-order of Luke-Acts might be expected to help in this connection, since presumably we have here the same author handling gospel and non-gospel material; but the statistics recorded below on subject, verb, object order offer scant encouragement along this line. At that, it was interesting to find no case of vso order in the first eleven chapters of Acts, and the 8 cases of sov in Luke all in the section 7³⁰—22³⁷.

The findings for the genitive and the noun modified were, in the present preliminary survey, quite similar to those for adjective order, i. e., New Testament writings and other Greek place the genitive first much more frequently than do the known translation books of the LXX.

For postpositive conjunctions, however, the variations gave promise of being as extensive, or more extensive, between literary and colloquial than between translation and original Greek. This is largely accounted for by the ease with which $\delta\epsilon$ can be substituted for $\kappa\alpha\iota$. Also, as stated above, $\delta\epsilon$ died colloquially.

Table

	VSO	SVO	SOV	VOS	OSV	OVS ⁶
Iliad	—	1	4	2	1	2
Antigone	—	5	3	—	1	1
Apology, Crito, Republic . . .	—	1	7	1	1	—
Anabasis	3	4	1	2	—	—
Romans	—	4	5	—	—	1
Ignatius	1	1	2	2	1	3
Papias	—	—	2	1	2	—
Epictetus	—	3	2	—	2	3
I Clement	—	3	5	1	—	1
Josephus, Antiquities	1	6	2	1	—	—
John	—	4	3	1	2	—
Hermas	—	4	6	—	—	—
Bikelas, Luke Laras	1	8	—	1	—	—
Xenopulos, Students	—	9	1	—	—	—
Genesis	10	—	—	—	—	—
Exodus	10	—	—	—	—	—
Leviticus	10	—	—	—	—	—
Numbers	9	—	—	1	—	—
Deuteronomy	4	5	—	—	—	—
Papyri	4	3	2	—	—	1
Inscriptions	2	5	2	—	—	1
Joshua	7	2	—	—	—	1
Judges	6	3	—	—	—	1
Ruth	7	3	—	—	—	—
I Kingdoms	5	4	—	—	—	—
III Kingdoms	8	2	—	—	—	—
IV Kingdoms	8	2	—	—	—	—
Judith	6	4	—	—	—	—
Tobit	4	4	—	2	—	—
I Maccabees	5	5	—	—	—	—
II Maccabees	1	4	4	—	—	—
III Maccabees	1	2	5	—	2	—
IV Maccabees	—	2	5	2	1	—
Synoptic Parallels {	Mark . . .	3	9	4	—	1
	Matthew .	1	5	1	—	1
	Luke . . .	1	4	2	—	1
Luke, entire	9	19	8	2	—	1
Acts	6	31	1	1	1	5
Biblical Aramaic	2	23	4	3	—	3
Wisdom of Solomon	—	8	2	—	—	—
Wisdom of Jesus	1	9	—	—	—	—
Enoch	1	6	2	1	—	—

The seventh of the above listed items has been tested more thoroughly. The investigation was limited to main declarative clauses where both subject and object are substantives. The usual Hebrew prose order is vso. The later Aramaic order is svo. Hebrew prose

⁶ See p. 247 n. 5.

keeps closely to the normal order, Aramaic has more variety, while ancient Greek has the greatest variety. Several classical authors, a number of LXX books, most of the NT authors, some of the Apostolic Fathers, a number of papyri, a few inscriptions, and several modern compositions were employed. All the LXX books with Massoretic texts showed their character plainly by this test. Daniel even showed the Hebrew order in the Hebrew sections and the Aramaic in the Aramaic section, but the second Hebrew section raises some questions. In each case I started at the first of a work and read until I had collected ten, or more, examples. The ground was gone over only once, so there are probably some errors, but the evidence speaks for itself in its striking uniformity.

Note especially for translation Greek, the heavy scores in the first column and, for original Greek, the light scores in this same column. Note also the blanks in the third column and the comparative variety in original Greek writings.

The main difficulty with this test in reference to the Gospels is that Biblical Aramaic and later Greek have practically the same order. As to Palestinian Aramaic in the first century, we are, of course, in the dark, but the most likely conjecture is that svo order predominated. Biblical Aramaic and Syriac are apparently the nearest relatives. R. H. Charles⁷ has made a study of the subject-verb-object order in Aramaic. My study was entirely independent of his and followed a somewhat different method, but the conclusions for Biblical Aramaic are practically the same. The Biblical Aramaic order is presented in the table. The only apparent difference from the synoptic order is that Aramaic is more consistently svo. John exhibits less affinity to the Aramaic than do the Synoptics. These parallel passages in the Synoptics are strikingly different from the Hebrew and rather characteristically Greek.

As to the other six items of word order, though we are reminded by D. W. Riddle⁸ and others that we do not know what Palestinian Aramaic of the first century was like, yet we certainly know it was

⁷ *Commentary on Daniel*, p. cvii.

⁸ The Logic of the theory of Translation Greek, *JBL*, Vol. LI, 1932, p. 28, etc.

Semitic; and in all probability, most of the peculiarities found in the word order of Hebrew, biblical Aramaic, and Syriac, also characterized it.

Nevertheless, it still appears unlikely that the facts of word-order will offer much support to the theory that any NT books are translation Greek, but they clearly indicate, *per se*, that Judith, I Maccabees, and other LXX books, are from Semitic originals.

The value of word-order for detecting translations will, in any case, be in direct proportion to the literalness of the translation and the freedom of the original from poetic passages.

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